DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 827 FL 020 919

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TITLE ITA "Teacher Talk"--Discourse Markers as Guideposts to Learning.
PUB DATE [90]
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Classroom Techniques; Definitions; *English (Second Language); *English for Academic Purposes; English for Special Purposes; *Foreign Students; Higher Education; *Language Patterns; Teacher Education; *Teaching Assistants
IDENTIFIERS Memphis State University TN; *Teacher Talk

ABSTRACT

In a study at Memphis State University (Tennessee), international students training as teaching assistants were taught the importance of discourse markers and other techniques for communicating in the classroom. The discourse markers are verbal cues that serve important pedagogical functions such as separating ideas, indicating temporal relationships and causation, and providing emphasis and contrast. They are characteristic of teacher talk, and improve the clarity and effectiveness of pedagogical communication. Students were also taught other ways of integrating teacher talk into the curriculum, including speed of speech, style of presentation, formal rhetorical structure, longer periods of speech without interruption, specific kinds of body language, use of props such as the chalkboard, and phrases commonly used by teachers. Early in the training programs, each subject was videotaped presenting a 7-minute explanation of a term from his discipline. After instruction, subjects were videotaped again, presenting the same explanation but with integration of teacher talk. Results indicate the effectiveness of the training. A 15-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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ITA "Teacher Talk"--Discourse Markers as Guideposts to Learning

Teresa Dalle and Margaret Inglis

Research into the variables affecting ITAs' (International Teaching Assistants') classroom skills indicates that the speech of the college classroom is unique, not really equivalent to textbook or social discourse (Ard, 1989). Classroom discourse, or "teacher talk", serves to lead undergraduate students not only through the syllabus but also through the individualized explanation of a particular topic. Such discourse is a legitimate teaching concern for ITA training programs (Stevens, 1989). Moreover, undergraduate students expect an interactive communicator style in the classroom, a style characterized by **discourse markers**, those verbal cues or "guideposts" that serve such important pedagogical functions as separating ideas, indicating temporal relationships and causation, and providing emphasis and contrast (Pica et al., 1990).

The present study demonstrates that when ITAs incorporate "teacher talk" into their explanations, their presentations improve in clarity and effectiveness. In this study at Memphis State University, ITAs enrolled in a training class were videotaped presenting a seven-minute explanation of a term taken from their discipline. Approximately a month later, after studying and discussing lecture techniques and the importance of classroom discourse markers, the ITAs were videotaped once again presenting the same explanation but integrating "teacher talk." The positive results of the use of effective discourse markers is evident in matched pairs of videotaped samples of these ITA presentations and the subsequent evaluations of each.

At a time when much discussion centers on how effective single semester ITA training can be, this paper focuses attention on a concrete teaching technique that enhances ITA classroom communication skills.

One difficulty in designing an ITA training program is reconciling what researchers and trainers know to be the "FTA" problem" (Bailey 1982) with what undergraduates and their parents "perceive" to be the problem. Work by Constantides 1987, Orth 1982, and Phelps 1984 suggests that "what undergraduates 'think' is the ITA's problem (poor speaking skills) is not the problem at all" (Stevens 181). This is not to suggest that undergraduates may not understand the speech of ITAs; that may be true. However, such unintelligibility may derive from the ITAs' inability to mimic English intonation and to use effectively the suprasegmental features of English. If the ITA has a "fossilized" pronunciation, as is the case with many, the ITA training program has a doubly difficult task: include a pronunciation component to satisfy university administrators and parents and attempt to train an ITA whose inaccurate pronunciation

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may be so ingrained that it takes heroic efforts to overcome it. All this must be done in one semester!

Stevens 1989 suggests that if by "pronunciation problems" undergraduates, parents, and administrators really mean "oral intelligibility" then we are no longer dealing with straight linguistic issues but also with cultural ones since intelligibility includes more than accurate production of sounds. It also includes accurate and acceptable intonation, rhythm, stress, reductions, loudness, softness, proxemics, gestures, and facial expressions (182).

Rounds 1987 in her article on ITA training states that several researchers have described special discourse styles common to teachers. The problem ITAs have may extend beyond pronunciation and intonation; they simply may not have mastered the special discourse of "teacher talk." The features of "teacher talk" or teacher discourse style we wish to highlight are the following: rhetorical structure, supportive language, pacing, techniques for emphasis, nonverbal framing, and discourse markers. Of these, the one we wish to emphasize most is the use of discourse markers. It is featured in our accompanying videotape. We have observed in ITA training that when participating ITAs integrate discourse markers into their lectures, they improve the clarity of their presentations.

Ways of Integrating "Teacher Talk" into the Curriculum

As stated before, we have found that the effective use of "teacher talk" can be successfully taught in an ITA semester-long course and once integrated into the ITA's presentation it favorably affects the clarity of the lecture.

Initially, it is important to get the ITAs to think about the differences between classroom speech and social conversation. We do this by **Brainstorming**. Every ITA suggestion is unjudgementally accepted and noted on the chalkboard. The main points expressed are:
1) the speed of speech - the lecture speed is slower
2) the emphasis - the style of presentation is more dramatic (acting)
3) a formal rhetorical structure has to be followed
4) the length of speaking without interruption is longer
5) unique body language, such as eye contact, must be observed
6) props, such as the chalkboard, need to be used well
7) special language phrases are used by teachers

Rhetorical Structure

Kaplan 1972 pointed out that different cultures have different systems of rhetoric. "Logic (in the popular, rather than the logician's sense of the word) which is the basis of rhetoric, is

evolved out of a culture; it is not universal" (295). If ITAs use fluent English but present their information in an unfamiliar pattern it is usually misunderstood. Many ITAs have not studied English composition and are unfamiliar with the English system of rhetoric or may not have thought about how it applies to the formal speech of the classroom. We begin to explain this system by telling the ITAs how English speaking school children learn to write a paragraph--then a composition--then a paper. Each segment is built on an organizational principal of three parts. These parts can be regarded as the structural framework of the presentation. At the simplest they are: 1) Introduction, 2) Body, and 3) Conclusion. Transferred to the classroom they become 1) Opening/Review, 2) Development of New Information, 3) Closing/Summary/Preview.

Once the ITAs can visualize this structure and the importance of it to their English speaking students' understanding of their presentations, they can more readily accept the importance of marking the transitions from one part of the structure to the next.

Supportive Language

Supportive language is any language which demonstrates concern with students learning the material. It is a feature of an interactive style. Research done by Rounds 1987 corroborated earlier research done by Bailey 1982 which revealed that "an increase in the use of inclusive pronouns such as we, our, let's and us [is] one type of linguistic evidence for increased interactivity linked with successful teaching" (648). Of all pronouns, we occurs more frequently than I or you. In fact, "among the more successful TAs, we occurs 62%-65% of the time, or approximately three times more frequently than either of the other personal pronouns; the less successful TAs used we only 40%-50% of the time" (Rounds 648). Rounds states that "a greater use of we in some way correlates to communicative competence in the classroom" (649).

Why is this? One suggestion is that the inclusive we (I + you) reduces the psychological distance between speaker and listener and places them in the same domain. It signals "solidarity" with students. Rounds 1987 further suggests that "the use of inclusive pronouns is a positive factor in terms of interactivity" (650). She warns, however, that the use of such pronouns is an effect of interactive teaching, not a cause of it.

Pacing

The attribute of pacing is one that good teachers use as they chunk information, use silence appropriately, and speak at an acceptable rate (Rounds 1987, 651). Chunking information means that teachers recognize the need for a smooth flow of language which allows for silence at phrase boundaries, or "focus clusters" (654).

Silence acts as a frame for important points and occurs before and after significant terms. If a speaker ignores phrase boundaries or uses them inappropriately, students lose attention. Practice for chunking information is found in The Foreign Teaching Assistant's Manual (Bryd et al., 1989, 107).

The speed of delivery is important also. The most successful NNS TAs in Rounds 1987 study used 7700 and 7100 words during a class session whereas the least successful (according to evaluations) used only 2400. Other researchers have suggested that "130 words per minute or slower is considered slow for teaching purposes" (651).

Techniques for Emphasis

Teachers use techniques for emphasis both in what they say, how they say it, and what they do. Appropriate questioning, for example, focuses students' attention. Emphasizing important terms by writing them and saying them helps students make connections.

The Chalkboard

This is a good point at which to discuss the tremendous importance of the chalkboard for ITAs. The chalkboard can be the ITA's most important ally providing the following points are kept in mind.

The writing needs to be large and legible from the back and sides of the classroom. ITAs should try to keep their bodies from blocking the view of the writing.

The board should be organized so that important vocabulary is on the board and an outline of the class is shown. The Foreign Teaching Assistant's Manual (Byrd et al., 1989) has an excellent example on page 65. Information that is already on the board can be framed for emphasis by underlining it or circling it. This framing can be done more easily than writing every thing out in front of the class. Advance preparation of the board allows the ITA to concentrate on speech instead of on writing and spelling.

Because ITAs have accents their pronunciation can be easily misunderstood. Therefore, it is very important that they turn frequently toward the class. Equally important is the knack of writing and talking simultaneously. The students appreciate "hearing" what the ITA is writing and can become familiar with the ITA's accent when the speech is reinforced with a visual representation. In this way the chalkboard becomes a pronunciation aid.

Repetitions and Restatements

Another technique good teachers use is elaboration and repetition of key points. Rounds 1987 notes that "the more successful teacher simultaneously provides explicit marking of a major juncture ... as well as cohesion between instances of problems by reinforced repetition of pertinent phrases with and between [math] problems" (664). The teacher ties ideas together within the class and ties classes together by reminding students of prior discussions.

In practice this means that ITAs need to learn to make **important** points more than once. This is particularly significant because ITAs' accents may interfere with the meaning and cause misunderstanding the first time the point is made. This can be done as follows:

verbal reinforcement
- repeat - make internal summaries
- paraphrase - use new words
- question students for comprehension
- make final summaries & preview new work

nonverbal reinforcement
- use new media
- reinforce the lecture with what is in the text
- demonstrate the point physically
- use audiovisual aids
- prepare handouts
- use the chalkboard effectively

Nonverbal Framing

"Body language" is a part of "teacher talk". A good teacher writes information on the board then frames the information through appropriate body actions (underlining or pointing), thereby focusing students' attention. Another example is the use of eye contact to check students' comprehension. There are many good ways to emphasize important points. Other ways to effectively frame the critical information with nonverbal mannerisms are:
- pointing out a textbook illustration
- pausing for attention
- demonstrating phenomenon
- drawing or pointing to a diagram.

Discourse Markers

Allen and Reuter 1990 describe discourse markers as "structural signposts" in their discussion of lecturing. They perceive the larger segmentation of the lecture as partitions and the transitions within the body of the lecture as structural signposts. Furthermore, they

see the signposts as three types: signal words--"next", rhetorical questions--"Where do we go from here?" and linking phrases--"So that explains the procedure, but what advantage does it hold?" (85).

Chaudron and Richards 1986 discuss the importance of discourse markers on the comprehension of academic lectures. They distinguish two types of markers: macro-structures and micro-structures.

The macro-structure signals the "overall organization of lectures" through highlighting major information in the lecture and sequencing important information. Some examples are such phrases as "let's go back to the beginning" or "what I'm going to talk about today...." (Chaudron and Richards 115).

These macro-structures are the verbal guideposts that lead students through the lecture. They can play the following role:
- tie the presentation together
- introduce information
- alert the audience to new and important information
- indicate a transition
- summarize information.

Micro-structures indicate links between sentences within the lecture or function as fillers. At the micro level verbal guideposts:
- create segmentation - "well," "okay," "all right"
- indicate a time sequence - "after that," "eventually"
- show cause and effect - "because," "then"
- show contrast - "on the other hand"
- indicate emphasis - "In fact," "obviously"
- indicate an example - "for example"
- redirect or interrupt - "now let's see..."
- make logical connections - "in this way"
- clarify or aid understanding - "we'll see that..."
- invite participation or discussion - "now where are we?"

We practice recognizing these guideposts by marking them on a handout sheet. Using these words and phrases does not come naturally to many ITAs. We give them a list of phrases taken from the International Teaching Assistant Handbook by Ronkowski 1986 because what does come naturally is memorization. The ITAs are encouraged to memorize phrases and practice using them in presentations in the class. Many ITAs integrate the phrases quite well especially after they are shown a video of an ITA presenting with and without the markers.

Rounds 1987 suggests that discourse markers are appreciated by students because such transitions mark topic boundaries and the relations within topics (662).

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1983 call these kinds of transitions "logical connectors," that is, "words or phrases whose

function it is to show some logical relationship between two or more basic sentences....[L]ogical connectors have primarily a cohesive function, which holds within or between surface structure sentences."

The use and control of such markers is not universal among languages and is difficult to explain. For example, it has been found that native speakers can correct surface errors in ESL learners' writing but had more difficulty with correcting global errors related to the use of connectors.

Logical connectors are present according to the function they fill, generally, additive (signals addition, introduction, similarity), adversative (conflict, contradiction, concession), causal (cause/effect, reason/result), or sequential (chronological or logical sequence).

By using "teacher talk" effectively ITAs are able to compensate for their accented English and to provide their undergraduate students with guideposts to learning. Just as we appreciate a clearly indicated traffic sign or street sign at the point we begin to fear we are lost, so too undergraduates appreciate the use of "teacher talk" to cue the direction for them with an appropriate and clearly indicated signal.

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